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ABSTRACT

The mission of a communication or speaking center--to enhance opportunities for pursuing speaking proficiency--is an impressive goal for any college or university. Responsibility for its pursuit and attainment is often assigned to a very few. To serve the campus community to the greatest extent, a communication center must depend upon the support of faculty from all academic disciplines; the staff of a speaking center is typically viewed as responsible for engaging faculty interest. If the efforts of the communication center are to succeed, faculty preparation needs to be earnest, if not enthusiastic. For this to be manifested, the staff of a communication center should research each department's objectives, apprise themselves of course aims and requirements, ascertain knowledge of and highlight those programs which offer greatest potential, and be prepared to meet individual faculty members at their particular levels of need. Professors, like students, bring to a course or an assignment varied backgrounds in and understanding of proficiency in speech or communication competence. They need demonstrable evidence that a speaking-intensive course component will enhance understanding of course material and accrue to students' benefit in their pursuit of speaking excellence. Faculty development, which includes research and appraisal, therefore, becomes a preemptory necessity in the establishment of a communication center to which faculty members decide to lend informed, wholehearted, and consistent support. (Author/NKA)

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Engaging in the Pursuit of Speaking Excellence: A Faculty Decision

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Abstract

The mission of a communication or speaking center – to enhance opportunities for pursuing speaking proficiency – is an impressive goal for any college or university. Responsibility for its pursuit and attainment is often assigned to a very few. To serve the campus community to the greatest extent, a communication center must depend upon the support of faculty from all academic disciplines; the staff of a speaking center is typically viewed as responsible for engaging faculty interest. If the efforts of the communication center are to succeed faculty participation needs to be earnest, if not enthusiastic. For this to be manifested, the staff of a communication center should research each department's objectives, apprise themselves of course aims and requirements, ascertain knowledge of and highlight those programs which offer greatest potential, and be prepared to meet individual faculty members at their particular levels of need. Professors, like students, bring to a course or an assignment varied backgrounds in and understanding of proficiency in speech or communication competence. They need demonstrable evidence that a speaking-intensive course component will enhance understanding of course material and accrue to students' benefit in their pursuit of speaking excellence. Faculty development, which includes research and appraisal, therefore becomes a preemptory necessity in the establishment of a communication center to which faculty members decide to lend informed, wholehearted, and consistent support.

Socrates: Now do you know how we may best please God in practice and theory, in this matter of words?
Phaedrus: No indeed. Do you?
Socrates: I can tell you the tradition that has come down from our forefathers, but they alone know the truth of it. However if we could discover that for ourselves, should we still be concerned with the fancies of mankind?

-- Plato, *Phaedrus*

At the University of Richmond's Speech Center the staff is ever mindful that the service we provide is not required for graduation. And though the size of the staff has expanded, it is still a relatively small group. At the same time we know that our charge and the focus of our attention and energies – the pursuit of excellence in speech – is critical to our students' futures: to their careers, their relationships, their civic participation, and to the intellectual quality of their lives.

Faculty development has proceeded accordingly. Taking a realistic appraisal of our aims, which include:

1. to foster among faculty an appreciation for oral communication competence and the ways it can enhance student learning;

2. to assist faculty members who wish to incorporate communication components in their coursework through one-to-one meetings, training workshops, resources, feedback forms, pedagogical information-sharing, and student staff assistance;

3. to encourage each department in the three undergraduate schools to offer one or more speech-intensive courses annually; and

4. to facilitate faculty, staff, and administrative use of the Speech Center for their own professional purposes so as to promote continually high standards for articulate behavior throughout the University community (Hobgood, forthcoming).

it is the third objective that has proven the greatest challenge. We have, in essence, a communication-across-the-curriculum aim without the sanction of an across-the-curriculum requirement. Faculty from a number of departments – finance, marketing,

sociology, leadership studies, education, modern languages, continuing studies, the freshman core course and our own department of rhetoric and communication studies -- use the Speech Center regularly and continuously. But the active participation of some fields and conspicuous absence of others suggested inquiry as to reasons for use. We wondered also how faculty outside the department of speech communication perceived both the function of the Speech Center within the context of the university and the field of rhetoric and communication studies as an academic discipline. Answers to such questions were necessary if we were going to respond appropriately and allocate constructively our own limited resources of energy, allotted funds, and time.

That misconceptions abound as to the nature and scope of communication studies is well known and well documented. That such misconceptions reside within the academy is made evident in our own campus-wide faculty meetings. Disagreement within the discipline as to just what constitutes proficiency in oral communication can lead to confusion for those in other disciplines who may be invited to assist in emphasizing the importance of communication competence (Hockel, 1991). Lack of understanding as to what communication competence involves, or uncertainty about the meaning of rhetoric as a practical art might not be so significant were it not for the fact that such understanding is, as Aristotle made clear, critically important to every other scholarly endeavor. Recounting the study of rhetoric in Greco-Roman education, Donald Lemen Clark noted that its placement in the curriculum was, until the last century, intrinsic and appreciated.

> The ancient schools did not suffer from departmentalism as ours do. Rhetoric was not something to be taught as a separate and isolated skill, but an organic art, at work "discovering all possible means to persuasion in any subject" [Aristotle]…. This art, which teaches the student how to acquire learning, to organize it, and to present it persuasively to an

> audience, is traditionally called rhetoric. Without rhetoric, designated by whatever name, liberal education cannot successfully humanize and civilize the young. As Isocrates truly declares, "None of the things which are done with intelligence are done without the aid of speech. (Clark, 1957)

With conviction and no lack of enthusiasm, those who work at the Speech Center echo Isocrates' claim; we feature it on our printed material and web site information. Reiterated frequently in workshops and faculty seminars, attendees are observed nodding their assent. None has risen to dispute the statement. Without appearing to presume that all professors embrace it to the extent that we do, our task becomes that of convincing professors to act on something that for the most part they seem already to believe and then encouraging them to choose to become engaged. Yet as communication scholars know only too well, the gap between belief and action can present a formidable challenge, one that calls for audience analysis and rhetorical sensitivity. If colleagues are to be persuaded to commit to competent communication as a course objective, those advocating the commitment should take nothing for granted.

Assisting professors in arriving at the decision to engage involves a thorough appraisal of the curricular obligations and objectives of faculty in other disciplines. As part of this needs assessment we proceeded, one department at a time, to research each department's mission statement, interview the chair, visit department meetings, and talk with faculty members themselves. Disciplines already making regular and frequent use of the Speech Center appeared to be doing so for pragmatic reasons. Faculty who required their students to use the Speech Center expected us to supply them with rather formulaic information. They seemed surprised, often pleasantly, to discover that our consultation format and peer critiques were so closely tied to all of the classical rhetorical canons, each of which was always clearly defined. Client evaluations alluded to

presuppositions that a trip to the Speech Center probably meant getting advice about gestures, eye contact, and chewing gum. Faculty evaluations were more diplomatic: "I was under the impression that you attended solely to aspects of style and delivery."

We had reason to believe this same presupposition precluded interest and engagement on the part of non-participating faculty. In other words, they accepted Isocrates' claim but didn't view the Speech Center as actually addressing all that competence in speech requires. There is reason for such skepticism. Only so much can be covered in 45 minutes – the standard duration of a Speech Center appointment. The simple answer is that we do our best. Whether during a single appointment we manage to introduce an impressive range of material or decide to focus on one or two aspects in-depth where a deficiency is deemed acute, we maintain that either is certainly preferable to the alternative of unmet need. But it seemed there remained another hesitant constituency, those who concluded that our staff's understanding of subject matter outside the realm of speech communication was probably minimal; it could not be sufficient for responsible content-specific assessment of speaking effectiveness. The notions of the latter group we have sought most vigorously to address.

A cornerstone of the Ciceronian legacy is the definition of the model rhetor as one who is, first and foremost, in possession of a broad range of knowledge on numerous topics and is considered qualified to render judgment on those topics intelligently. When a professor assigns students a Speech Center visit we request from that professor a copy of or access to as much information as possible pertinent to the range of topics we can expect to encounter during practice sessions with the students in that class. We ask all professors to direct our attention to any particular criteria they may have devised for their

assignments, over and above the guidelines we use at the Speech Center, so that we may assess content along those prescribed, pre-established frameworks. Any material sent to us is reviewed in advance of the clients' visits. We now schedule two consultants for each consultation whenever it is possible, to maximize attention to content accuracy. We cannot and do not purport to clients to possess qualified expertise as to the content of their presentations; quite the opposite is true. We disclaim sure knowledge regarding the accuracy of evidence in their speeches, but stress repeatedly the fact that their own credibility depends upon the audience's perception that they understand thoroughly their selected topics. We attempt to address the content dilemma in other ways as well. Our staff is composed of undergraduates majoring in subjects that span the curriculum. While most on the staff are minors if not double-majors, there is no requirement that a student consultant be a Rhetoric and Communication Studies major. This multi-curricular representation on our staff is one way to support Cicero's prerequisite.

The primary response to this hesitancy has been our fellows program. In this undertaking one student consultant is assigned to work with a single section of a particular course, preferably one belonging to the fellow's own major or a course in which the fellow has been previously enrolled. The fellow often sits in on classes and works regularly with the professor and with individual students repeatedly during the semester to address speaking effectiveness within the course context and using course content. Experiences with this program have persuaded some of the most dubious faculty members as to the earnestness of our intent to provide the most thorough assistance possible. When faculty and fellows work together satisfaction has been mutual and significant progress has been noted. These efforts have been supported by the

enhancement of resources at the Speech Center to meet varied subject matter, including a collection of speeches delivered by students in courses across curricular fields. The number of faculty from less-involved departments using the Speech Center for the first time is growing steadily and there is a well-founded sense that we are making progress.

Incidents occur that lead us to redouble our efforts with the un- or less-engaged faculty. A computer science major arrived for an appointment during spring semester to practice a speech for an extracurricular event. Someone he respected highly had suggested he would benefit from a consultation, and at the end of the session he asked if he could come again to work on his presentation. He was convinced that improvement was needed. The student came three times and there was noticeable progress at each visit. Leaving the Speech Center after his last session, the student asked: "Do you ever work with the math majors? Because I know some people who could really use this place!" About this same time we were reviewing stacks of client evaluations. The highest praise for our work appeared to come from those students who were least anxious to come to the Speech Center – mainly students from the math and science fields. Guess which departments we are targeting this year!

Considerable attention is devoted to new faculty, to acquaint them with this university facility and because they frequently welcome new pedagogical approaches. Those who teach courses at the introductory level are also targeted for frequent contact so that freshmen can be made aware of the Speech Center as early as possible in their undergraduate experience. Four faculty workshops are scheduled annually, and we have changed the times for those workshops from the lunch hour to early mornings on different days of the week. The director of the Speech Center schedules 35-40

presentations on the Speech Center during fall and spring semesters, to groups ranging in size from five to fifty persons. A catalogue of resources to assist faculty including samples of speaking assignments similar to Robert Weiss' "recipe book" (Weiss, 1986) of pedagogical strategies that have proven effective is available for professors to examine at their convenience. Most notably successful, among our various attempts to encourage faculty to decide to become engaged, however, are three methods whose effects we can neither predict nor guarantee: the one-to-one planning session, the collegial conversation, and the individual faculty Speech Center visit.

When an instructor schedules a meeting with the Speech Center director to consider incorporating an oral communication course component that includes Speech Center use, they can together review course objectives and discuss methods and assessment strategies that will accompany this component. The faculty member's visit includes a tour of the Speech Center and a brief simulation demonstrating to the instructor what the students from that class may expect when they reserve time for an appointment. This is invariably the most responsible way for us to undertake faculty development, to do what Cronin and Glenn urge must be "handled properly" (1989), and potential for highest levels of satisfaction are greater when it is the faculty member who initiates contact with the Speech Center. The one-to-one planning session appears sufficiently worthwhile that we are now considering insisting upon this format as a prerequisite to working with a professor's class. A bold move, to be sure, for a center that is voluntary, but so far faculty members have been happy to comply.

More often than not, as familiarity with the Speech Center grows, faculty who contact us do so on the basis of some interaction that has taken place with a colleague in

which a good experience with the Speech Center has been reported. Theories of interpersonal influence apply readily to this phenomenon we have observed and from which we benefit. When respected others express approval or satisfaction with our efforts and their fellow faculty members consider that in terms of their own teaching, we experience the reverberation of a job "doubly" well done. We have become all too cognizant of the responsibility that compliment imposes to provide continued faithful service, knowing that dissatisfaction can mushroom similarly if not more quickly.

No form of faculty development is more consequential for student use of the Speech Center than a consultation with an individual member of our faculty. Professors come regularly to work on speeches for panel presentations, practice remarks to community or governmental agencies, or adapt reports of research findings to suit television or radio audiences or groups of various levels of understanding or demographic composition. We promise these clients uninterrupted privacy and anonymity – records of their visits are maintained in terms of numbers only. But the faculty themselves are inclined to discuss their visits, especially if the experiences are recalled favorably. The unanticipated benefits that accrue from these shared experiences often include required visits by their students whose impressions will in turn serve to reinforce or diminish a professor's inclination to repeat the requirement.

Occasionally faculty members will respond to proposals encouraging Speech Center use for their students with pleas that there simply isn't enough time to accomplish everything they would like to do. I like Tamara Burk's reply, here paraphrased: "Wouldn't you rather be certain the students have learned eighty per cent of the course

material well enough to be able to discuss it accurately, responsibly, and effectively, than hope they have learned all the material somewhat?"

This question speaks to our own purpose and objectives as communication scholars and reminds us of our role in if not obligation to the larger academic community. George Kennedy's translation of the *Rhetoric* (1991) interprets Aristotle as contending that we are a people "in *need* of argument" [italics mine]. In the realm of higher education where the testing of ideas is understood to be most intense, most unfettered, of the highest intellectual quality, and characterized by an enlightened civility, what academic discipline should be immune from student acquaintance in rhetoric and dialectic? If we who teach rhetoric and/or communication studies are in the business of pursuing speaking excellence not for its own sake but as a means of engaging in the higher pursuit of truth and, as Jefferson avowed, "wherever it may lead," then we don two hats. Joined in a search for the ends we simultaneously uphold the integrity of the means, becoming advocates of training in speaking competence as a time-honored method of locating validity in any body of knowledge. An oral communication lab can be the critical starting point.

Undergraduate faculty members tend to place great faith in written composition as a reliable means of uncovering a student's capacity to grapple with ideas. While a paper can and should serve as an opportunity to teach effectively how to examine, organize, develop, and defend an idea, classical scholars discerned a real difference between the gathering of knowledge intended for spoken as opposed to written purposes.

Lines excerpted from Plato's *Phaedrus,* used to introduce this essay, commence a dialogue comparing the virtues of written and spoken discourse. Socrates prepares to

consider the aptness of writing beginning with its mythic origins and wonders aloud whether we would even be interested in human speculation if we were able on our own to discern truth apart from it. Phaedrus dismisses his query as silly but the significance of these musings to the value of the spoken word should not be overlooked. Socrates proceeds to extol the art of dialectic, employing his skills as a rhetor to do so. Preferring the capacity of the spoken to make a thought memorable as opposed to writing's convenience as "reminder," he suggests that true wisdom and the immortality of an idea actually depend on carefully planted seeds of knowledge by spoken means.

Our *need* of argument transcends any academic competency requirement. That need should inspire even greater dedication to training in the "discourse that is written down, with knowledge, in the souls of the listener… the living breathing discourse…" (Nehamas and Woodruff, 1995), the very form to which faculty members themselves are so distinctively accustomed. Our Speech Center serves as a gentle reminder.

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